



The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917

By David R. Stone

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David R. Stone's *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* is a masterful survey and synthesis of an understudied and misunderstood combatant of the First World War. Long overshadowed by events on the Western Front or in tragic sideshows like Gallipoli, Stone's treatment of the Imperial Russian Army is well researched and well written, challenging its readers to view Russian participation as more than just a prelude to the Russian Revolution. Perhaps most valuable for the soldier, instead of static warfare and large attacks with limited gains as on the Somme or at Verdun, Stone recounts how armies advanced and retreated with surprising mobility, often going hundreds of miles in a campaign. As our current discussion continues to focus on the potential for near-peer conflict with Russia, the places and battlefields Stone discusses are ripe for further study and battlefield staff rides.

The Russian army, Stone argues, was not that much different than her Western European allies and enemies. Russia's army was comparable to other continental powers: large-scale conscription, limited service time, reserve obligations. Similarly, all four major powers attempted decisive blows against their enemies during the opening of the war and all four failed. Furthermore, in combat, the Russian army frequently failed to turn operational successes into strategic victories. In other ways, though, the Imperial Russian Army was fundamentally different than the other combatants. First, it emphasized cavalry units over line infantry units. Secondly, it was significantly larger than its opponents or allies. Furthermore, it faced language and cultural issues as troops were drawn from across a polyglot empire. Stone's explanations of these similarities and contrasts set the stage for analysis of the war itself.

The book heavily weights the opening 18 months of the war, with only three chapters covering from 1916 on, including the Brusilov Offensive of 1916. These opening months were "marked by an almost uninterrupted sequence of campaigns" as both sides sought to gain the advantage in the east. The first six months of warfare saw multiple large-scale combat operations by all sides. As Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia battled, it became clear Russia was tactically and operationally unable to match the Germans, though "it performed quite respectably against Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire." Russia was similar to her allies and enemies as a vanguard of capable officers quickly rose through attrition and the removal of incompetent leaders. Similarly, the Russian Stavka also struggled with the new demands of industrialized warfare, frequently "failing to impose clear priorities on Russia's commanders and thereby splitting resources."

Stone's emphasis on the operational level of war allows him to focus on campaigns, the Stavka, and senior commanders. He deepens this analysis through discussions of society, politics, economics, and diplomacy in order to better explain the context for military decisions and operational events, including the eventual collapse of Imperial Russia. *The Russian Army in the Great War* is an excellent introductory work to combat in Eastern Europe. Stone picks up the mantle laid by works like Norman Stone (no relation) in 1975's *The Eastern Front* or W. Bruce Lincoln's *Passage Through Armageddon* and synthesizes more recent scholarship and understanding for his readers. This book should find a place on the shelves of commanders in Europe and their staffs, as well as those interested in World War I who are looking to expand beyond the traditional narratives of the Western Front.